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WRITING VOCABULARIES

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Interested in the recent efforts to arrive at a satisfactory spelling vocabulary through the study of the words used by average persons in ordinary written discourse, and curious to know how reliable the results of these efforts are, the writer undertook the study reported in this article.

The specific object of inquiry was whether or not the spelling vocabularies based on these studies and proposed for use in the public schools actually contain the words the pupils in the schools will need in later life. The vocabularies proposed for investigation in this study were the Ayres list of one thousand words and the lists given in the *Every-day Speller*. These latter lists are said to contain the great majority of all the words in the Ayres list and other similar lists, so that the results of any study of these lists ought to be significant. The only means of determining whether these lists contain the words adults need for written expression was to find out what words adults use in written expression and compare these with the words in the lists.

Just what forms of written expression should be studied for this purpose was a difficult problem to solve. It finally occurred to the writer that the letters written to the editors of newspapers offered a very satisfactory field for such an inquiry. The writers of these letters cannot be classed as non-literary; yet they are sufficiently of the people to be kept in mind when contemplating the spelling needs of adults, and usually they discuss everyday matters in everyday language.

The letters selected for this study were taken from the columns of a large Chicago daily newspaper. In all, two hundred letters were used. The words in the letters were listed alphabetically and carefully counted. There were 28,292 words and 3,360 different

words. As the point of inquiry was whether or not the Ayres list and the lists in the *Every-day Speller* would adequately meet the pupil's spelling needs in adult life, the new list was carefully compared with these.

The results were highly interesting and significant. In the Ayres list of one thousand words there are one hundred and seventeen words which should have occurred in the Chicago list at least three times, and many of them oftener, but which, in fact, did not occur even once. These were indeed very common words, such as five, bed, rain, hat, boat, top, soap, dress, happy, noon, news, etc. One wonders that they did not occur in the Chicago letters. The fact that they did not occur casts doubt upon any assumption that because a word occurs twelve times in a few lists of one hundred thousand running words each it may be expected to recur similarly in any other list compiled in like manner. Equally interesting was the group of words occurring four or more times in the Chicago list, and which, accordingly, should be in the Ayres list but are not. Of such words there were two hundred and thirty-seven. Many of these words are very common and non-technical, such as add, hay, hem, idle, pint, job, farmer, field, nurse, tape, sane, ton, etc. Here there is a very plain indication of the unreliability of another assumption, namely, that a list of the words occurring twelve or more times in a few lists of one hundred thousand running words will contain all the words apt to occur in other such lists.

The comparison of the Chicago list with the lists in the *Every-day Speller* also yielded interesting results. No effort was made to discover the number of words found in these lists which are not found in the Chicago list. The object of interest was to discover to what extent the authors of these books had succeeded in their effort to construct a vocabulary adequate for the spelling needs of adults. Accordingly, the lists in the spellers were carefully compared with the Chicago list to see whether or not the latter contains words not found in the spellers, and, if so, to note the nature of these words. By careful count there were found to be 108 words occurring four or more times in the Chicago list which are not in the lists in the spellers. And they were very common words, words which might well be regarded as belonging to the spelling

needs of adults, such as sane, vast, worse, owner, loyal, risk, product, daily, health, baker, ballot, coarse, crime, nation, beer, crisis, dealer, dairyman, civic, righteous, means, penalty, etc.

Here again we are forced to the conviction that present lists of words proposed for spelling vocabularies are inadequate. They fall short of their purpose—to supply the words needed by the average person in his written expression.

The writer's conviction, growing out of his experience in making this study, is that the inadequacy of present lists is due to the fact that in their preparation insufficient regard has been shown for important geographical and social factors. Vocabularies of individuals differ according to their habitat and according to their social relationships.

The conclusion to this study seems to be, not that the present effort to construct a writing vocabulary is moving in the wrong direction, but that it needs supplementing. Numerous other like studies should be made covering the writing vocabularies of many more people in widely scattered and representative localities and of diverse but representative social groups. Such a supplementing would undoubtedly result in the addition of several hundred words to the present lists and so provide a vocabulary more nearly "adequate for the spelling needs of adults."